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ABSTRACT

Communicative competence in a second language is conditioned by the transfer of linguistic, heuristic and interactive aptitudes. A solution to the problems raised by this threefold transfer might be found in the conjunction of psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic insights. A number of pedagogical techniques are suggested in order to show how the integration of a sociolinguistic model of interaction into a psycholinguistic model of encoding and decoding can be effected in practice. (Author/CFM)

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MELANGES PEDAGOGIQUES 1976

F. ROUSSEL

TOWARDS A REDUCTION OF TRANSFER FAILURES IN SECOND LANGUAGE ORAL SKILLS

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RESUME

Une solution possible au problème du transfert des aptitudes (linguistiques, heuristiques et intéractives), qui conditionne la compétence de communication en situation réelle, semble résider dans la conjonction de deux approches, l'une psycholinguistique, l'autre sociolinguistique. Une série de suggestions pédagogiques tente de montrer quelle forme pourrait prendre, dans la pratique, une telle intégration d'un modèle sociolinguistique de l'intéraction à une analyse de l'encodage et du décodage.

This paper was read at the IVth International Congress of Applied Linguistics, Stuttgart, 1975.

Performing efficiently in a real-life situation implies a threefold transfer on the part of the foreign language learner .

— transfert of linguistic competence in the second language (L2),

— transfer of heuristic, problem-solving strategies linked with the particular language skill concerned (indicating how to tackle each phase of the encoding or decoding process in consideration of the specific character of the situation),

— transfer of interactive techniques.

This threefold transfer which, I would suggest, makes up communicative competence, has to be effected in all language skills, whether written or oral, but obviously it is in the latter that it raises most problems owing to the extreme complexity of variables and to the time constraints inherent in oral communication. This is why I have chosen to analyse here how this process could be helped in the context of listening comprehension and oral expression.

Various attemps at solving this problem have been made in the past few years.

By orienting language teaching towards the acquisition of communicative competence, the functional approach, along with the use of authentic data, has already contributed to reducing the gap between learning and actual use. Still, by itself, it cannot ensure transfer because it does not sufficiently take into account the various mental operations entering into play in these processes (where various types of inhibitory factors are to be met in the form of psychic inertia, misconception of what is to be effected, etc...).

On the other hand, the light thrown upon the encoding and decoding processes by psychological, neurophysiological, and of course more specifically by psycholinguistic research, has enabled us to isolate a number of sub-skills which, if activated, can facilitate transfer. The limitation attached to this approach, however, is that is has so far concentrated on the verbal element in speech, to a great extent leaving aside extra-linguistic considerations such as total body communication and the social context of interaction.

The thesis which I shall try to support and illustrate in this paper is that if a solution to the problem of transfer failures is to be found, it may be in an integrated view of these two approaches — sociolinguistic on the one hand, psycholinguistic on the other —, and to be more precise, in the integration of a sociolinguistic model of interaction into a widely accepted psycholinguistic model of decoding and encoding. And this integration can assume at least the three following aspects :

1. Correcting, in view of what is pragmatically necessary and sufficient for communication, current misconceptions of oral skills which have an inhibitory effect on the mental operations involved and are thus responsible for transfer failure, if not communication breakdown ;
2. Developing in the learner a constant process of inductive reasoning which may help him arrive at a working categorization both of problems and of solution units, and thereby enable him to adapt himself to necessarily variable configurations of situational cues ;
3. Reducing psychic inertia by giving the learner " specific practice in the various types of operations he must perform almost automatically ", as was judiciously suggested by Wilga M. Rivers, but integrating into such a pedagogical framework the sociolinguistic elements which need to be taken into account in an interactive situation.

Here are a few indications as to how these three objectives could be attained in the teaching of oral skills. I shall deal very briefly with the first two, as they merely set conditions on the third and most essential one by showing respectively to what attention should be essentially directed and what form training should take in practice.

I. CORRECTING MISCONCEPTIONS OF ORAL SKILLS

Second language learners usually set themselves goals which are both too high and inappropriate in oral skills, owing to a confusion between two distinct aptitudes in the case of perception and in the case of production, owing to the use of an inadequate model.

To take first of all the case of listening comprehension, L2 learners currently assume that correct global comprehension is always narrowly dependent upon the detailed discrimination of segmental elements, which leads them to be disturbed by the slightest identification problem and then resort to chance skimming.

Obviously global comprehension requires both less and more than that. Less, owing to the condition of coherence which, according to Oswald Ducrot, all discourse tends to satisfy and which entails a given amount of redundancy in the message. It thus provides the listener with both a guide-line and numerous props, provided his attention is not focussed on details. So even in L2, a certain amount of skimming can and should take place, which is directly correlated with the degree of redundancy of information-bearing elements, not only at the segmental but at all informative levels. And it is only when a) there is a specially high density of informative elements, and b) these informative elements are carried only by the verbal channel, that discrimination of segmental elements needs to be fine-grained. Now it is true that these two features characterize most materials selected in the traditional teaching of listening comprehension, which has laid an almost exclusive stress on the cognitive content of oralized speech and may thus be held partly responsible for this view.

On the other hand, in interactive discourse, there is a lot more to be grasped than merely the cognitive content of speech ; one must also gather various types of interpersonal information, for example, " hear the paralinguistic emotive aspects of speech ", or " observe the other's facial expressions and other bodilly cues, as Michael Argyle mentions, in order to respond properly and allow for a meshing of performances to take place. But this the learner usually fails to do as all his attention is absorbed in the processing of the literal content.

So in order to help the learner arrive at an adequate conception of listening comprehension, it will be important to stress the fact that there is not one fixed listening comprehension strategy and to make him become less dependent upon the segmental component through sensitization to the various forms redundancy can assume. It will also be relevant to emphasize all the

techniques which may lead to the discrimination of higher discourse units and of their patterning, to appropriate skimming, and to the detection of pertinent interpersonal cues.

As far as oral expression is concerned, the model which the learner usually sets himself is that of spoken prose, which is inhibitory to most people in their nother tongue, even more so of course in a foreign language. Here, sensitization to the numerous shortcomings to be found in native speakers' impromptu performance should sweep away such misplaced scruples.[1] The learner's attention could particularly be drawn to the fact that there is no need to encode in large chunks, as Frieda Goldman Eisler's study of temporal variables has shown that " at its most fluent, two-thirds of spoken language comes in chunks of less than six words ", and fifty-per-cent in chunks of less than three words. Neither is there any reason to be self-conscious about hesitation phenomena since in spontaneous speech " the relationship between hesitant and subsequent fluent periods is such that together they seem to form a psycholinguistic unit. "

On the other hand, one will have to highlight all that may lead to misunderstandings at the interpersonal level or in some other way be detrimental to communication.

II. DEVELOPING A CAPACITY FOR OPERATIVE CATEGORISATION

Out of a similar concern for efficiency, a capacity for dynamic categorisation should be developed in the learner. It is known that verbal behaviour does not follow an associationistic model of the stimulus-response type : what one responds to is an essentially unstable configuration of cues ; hence the failure of methods which either try to set up reflexes through the reiteration of stimuli or which are based on the assumption that transfer from one situation to the other will take care of itself. In neither case is the learner prepared to detect a recurring pattern through contingent variations and thus to reinvest previously acquired strategies.

In order to tend towards this, the following suggestions may be of help :

1. Introducing authentic (as opposed to constructed) materials as early as possible ;

[1] See HEDDESHEIMER et alia (1973).

2. Focussing (implicitly or explicity, according to the case) on one point at a time (for example, on the structuring function of given prosodic or kinetic features, or on the detection of contained irritation in verbal behaviour, etc...) ;
3. Gathering extracts from tapes on self-access which exemplify this point, allowing contextual parameters to assume gradually more and more divergent values, so as to induce the learner to exert his capacity for inductive reasoning at each stage ;
4. Providing him with metalinguistic tools or any other type of guidance as necessary.

Obviously, such a methodological procedure entails practical constraints and its success is dependent on the learner's maturity and on the type of guidance given to him. But only through such means can all the conditions be met which, according to Léon Michaux, favour the integration and the evocation of a given item, namely " associations based on either similitude, or opposition, or proximity in time or space ".

III. REDUCING PSYCHIC INERTIA THROUGH SUB-SKILL TRAINING

Keeping in mind those points which should be emphasized in order to correct inhibitory representations of oral skills and the form which training should take in practice, let us now see how a psycholinguistic approach integrating sociolinguistic considerations can reduce psychic inertia at each phase of the decoding and encoding processes. In order to get down to the practical implications of such a principle, I shall analyse the case of decoding in particular detail.

If we regard language activity as a heuristic process, as does Leontiev (1972), we can distinguish three phases in decoding, the third one being concommitant with the other two : psychic orientation, processing of information, and monitoring.

That is. Even before starting to process a message, we subconsciously preselect, from a large number of alternative apprehension strategies, the one(s) most likely to be adapted to the situation at hand. Leontiev reports experiments conducted by other Russian psycholinguists [2], showing, for example, that subjects

[2] See ZINDER and STERN (1972).

systematically use different identification strategies in accordance with the signal-noise ratio, focussing their attention respectively on phonetic cues, semantic cues, and frequency of occurrence in cases of optimal, average or poor listening conditions. And he goes on to state that " in the perception of a significant message, solution units can either be isolated words (in cases of minimal noise), groups of words... or the whole sentence ".

Now, such a view, in which solution units consist of segmental elements, implies that one has previously chosen to concentrate on the verbal channel.

So I would suggest that, at this orientation stage, strategies could best be conceived of in communicative terms. What one then sub-consciously assesses is :

1. the use to which language is most likely to be put in the given situation, i.e. the register (e.g. lecture, conversation, interview...) and possibly also the genre (in the case of a radio-play or a detective story, etc...) both of which follow the conventional rules which will guide the listening process all along ;
2. the degree of likeliness that one will have to respond, to take part in the interaction ;
3. [a function of 1) and 2)], the relative importance to be attached to the cognitive / relational components of the message ;
4. [a function of 1), 2) and 3)], the order of priority likely to be given to the available communication channels (segmental, prosodic, paralinguistic, kinetic and situational information).

The resultant focussing of attention will of course constantly be liable to further readjustments through the monitoring operation while the processing of information proper is taking place. But, if pertinent clues have been correctly spotted and interpreted, they are likely to provide fairly secure ground for subsequent operations,

(i) by allowing for anticipation of the structure of the message

(ii) and thus its segmentation into higher units,

(iii) by providing the reference framework without which interpretation simply cannot take place, since a given utterance conveys different meanings in different registers,

(iv) and thereby allowing for selection of what is distinctive, and therefore crucial, in the situation at hand.

So, in order to enable the learner to take advantage of the valuable help thus afforded, it is essential to make him develop an intuitive idea of what conventions are attached to each register and genre in the culture of the target

language. Exposure to a few sound — or preferably video — tapes on self-access for each of the most current registers and genres can be sufficient for him to detect (through cultural divergences) what is common to his own culture and what listening strategies can then be transferred from his communicative competence in his mother tongue.

The second step in this orientation training will be to let him identify registers and genres from a minimal number of cues : from visual cues (such as the personality or conventional role [3] of the speaker, the situational set-up, etc...) by cutting off the sound of a film or a video-tape ; or from auditory cues (such as paralinguistic quality, key patterns [4] or the particular patterns of speech rhythms) by blurring the words of a sound tape through filters. By sensitizing the learner to all the information which can be obtained from non-verbal channels, this training should moreover allow for greater confidence and less dependency upon segmental elements.

Such a state of mind, associated with parallel monitoring, largely conditions an appropriate tackling of the processing stage proper, or process of perceptual construction, a subtle analysis of which is to be found in Wilga River's above-mentioned paper. I shall take up a few points in her study with a view to showing the need for a systematic integration of sociolinguistic elements at each phase of the training, that is training in (1) segmentation, (2) interpretation, (3) recoding, and (4) anticipation (I have left aside memorization as I think it can best be improved through training in segmentation and recoding).

(1) Segmenting the flow of speech into its component units, the basic operation upon which the processing of speech depends, is effected, according to Wilga Rivers, by applying " the phonotactic, syntactic and lexical collocational rules of the language to which we are attending ", and is purely a matter of linguistic competence.

So Wilga Rivers envisages segmentation in terms of *text structure*, whereas in an interactive situation I think there is a case for giving priority to segmentation in terms of *discourse structure*, and for looking elsewhere than merely at the segmental level for structural cues.

Indeed if, as we have seen in Part I, a rough discrimination of segmental units is usually sufficient, it is, however, essential to detect boundaries between the various hierarchical discourse ranks in order to sum up information at adequate points and to respond properly. These discourse ranks include conver-

[3] See LEONTIEV (1973).

[4] For more detailed information on the discursive importance of Key, see BRAZIL, D. (1975), *Discourse Intonation*, English Language Research, Birmingham University.

sation, topic, sequence, pair and turn, to take up Sacks and Schegloff's terminology. One can further subdivide turns into acts as do John Sinclair and Malcolm Coulthard.

For example, to start from the bottom rank, the listener cannot respond as he is expected to unless he has subdivided the other's previous turn into all its component acts. And in some cases several acts are super-imposed in one proposition, as in the example given by Christopher Candlin[5] where a doctor tells his patient " I'm just going to put a few stitches in " in order both to inform him and instruct the nurse to get the suture-set ready.

Secondly, the listener cannot respond *when* he is expected to unless he has developed a capacity to spot the likely ending of the other speaker's turn so as to give feedback with appropriate timing or ensure a smooth change of speaking turns. Now, semantic cues are not sufficient to detect such boundaries for even when a point seems to be completed and is followed by a pause, the speaker may always be about to add further developments. So perhaps the most reliable cues here are those pointing to sudden relaxation of psychic and muscular tension and are therefore essentially of a prosodic, paralinguistic and/or kinetic nature (the list of end-of-turn cues given by Starkey Duncan Jr.[6] seems to corroborate this view).

Similarly, within a fairly long turn, the structuring of information into points and the relative importance given by the speaker to the various informative elements (which need to be detected for appropriate skimming) can be apprenended in terms of tension versus relaxation and are reflected by key shifts, tonicity and kinetic patterning[7].

[5] English language skills for overseas doctors and medical staff, work in progress, Report II (May 1974), University of Lancaster.

[6] " The turn signal is comprised of a set of six behavioural cues :
(i) the use of any pitch level-terminal juncture combination other than 2 2 at the end of a phonemic clause,
(ii) paralinguistic drawl on the final or on the stressed syllable of a clause,
(iii) the termination of any hand gesticulation used by the speaker, or the relaxation of a tense hand position (e.g a fist) by the speaker,
(iv) the use by the speaker of one of a set of stereotyped expressions such as " but uh ", " or something ", or " you know ", termed sociocentric sequences by Bernstein,
(v) a drop in paralinguistic pitch and/or intensity, in conjunction with a sociocentric sequence,
(vi) the completion of a grammatical clause. "

[7] On the structuring function of shifts in bodily posture or in the orientation of the head, see SCHEFLEN.

One could go on and on for each of the other hierarchical ranks. I shall only mention one more, namely topics. Indeed it is essential to detect topic boundaries if one is to link adequately one's own contribution to that of the other's and respect the above-mentioned law of coherence, by adopting the same conceptual reference frame.

From all this it appears that training in segmentation should not merely consist in syntactic or even in textual analysis, but also and essentially in discourse analysis centred upon communicative needs.

The learner could be asked to list the component acts in various turns ; to give feedback at point boundaries in a taped (preferably video-taped) debate ; to analyse what prosodic, paralinguistic and kinetic cues usually reflect relaxation of tension or a wish to leave the floor ; to detect points of possible turn-taking in a fairly heated discussion, etc...

(2) Now the next sub-skill, interpretation, I shall consider jointly with monitoring, as monitoring is vital here. Indeed not only do lexical elements cover a necessarily different semantic content from one individual to the other but ambiguity is inherent in the linguistic system in the form of semantic presuppositions [9] and of interpersonal implications, so that there is no direct equation between what is expressed and what ist signified, particularly in daily interaction.

So interpretive procedures should be developed in the learner not only at the level of the explicit cognitive content of the message, as is currently being done, but at the other main informative levels (according to what is relevant in the situation concerned) :

(i) semantic implications

(ii) more essentially, the illocutionary function of the utterance, which, owing to social reasons, appears in a more or less disguised form according to the degree of formality of the message [10],

(iii) and the speaker's interpersonal attitude, which is also expressed through more or less indirect means, following the same criterion.

In order to arrive at a more correct interpretation of these last two informative elements, the learner could be asked to identify, with a minimal number of cues, the relative statuses of the participants in the interaction, their social and affective relationships, etc..., particularly through a correct identification

[9] See CORDER.

[10] See DUCROT, op. cit.

[11] For a more detailed discussion of this point, see ROUSSEL (1974).

of styles (formal, familiar, slovenly...). Having assessed the degree of formality which characterizes their relationship, he could then be asked wether a given utterance is to be taken at its face value or as a polite form of a disparaging or constraining function in that context, (e.g. the phrase " I entirely agree, but don't you think that... ", may convey warm agreement + a tentative objection, or it may be a toned-down contradiction). More generally, the learner should be sensitized to the various illocutionary functions a given utterance may convey according to accompanying gestures, facial expressions, prosodic features or situational components.

(3) the recoding process, securing the passage of information into long-term memory, is described by Wilga Rivers as " giving the gist " of what we have heard " usually in simple active affirmative declarative sentences. "

I think this is only one particular type of recoding and that training in recoding should assume different forms according to different types of registers, leading to the use of the reduced code [11] most appropriate in the case at hand, for example :

(i) for a lecture or other didactic registers, the obvious code to be used is note-taking, using indentation to show the relative subordination of elements ;

(ii) for an exchange of information, telegraphese ;

(iii) in registers where the importance of cognitive information tends towards zero to the benefit of relational information, recoding can mean simply identifying the illocutionary function of the utterance (e.g. identifying an integration signal, even if the exact words are not discriminated, merely from its place in exchange structure and the use of low key) [12].

(iv) it can even mean simply identifying the speaker's perlocutionary intention (as in some cases of phatic communication where it is the only thing that matters).

(4) In the case of anticipation, if useful training is to be provided, it has again to include monitoring. The learner could be asked to guess the likely end of a funny story or a detective story presenting a fairly high degree of redundancy ; or at a fairly advanced level, to find the word a speaker is looking

[11] I borrow the phrase from CORDER, S. P. " Simple codes and the source of the second language learner's initial heuristic hypothesis ", a paper read at the 4th Neuchatel Colloquium in Applied Linguistics, May 1975 (forthcoming).

[12] See JOHNS, T. F. " Intonation ", a paper read at the Nancy seminar on the Communicative Teaching of English and the Foreign Language Learner ; June 1974.

for, or finish his incomplete sentences (which, besides stimulating anticipation, would have high communicative value, provided it is not done too systematically).

The learner could also be induced to form (as well as to correct) expectations at a higher level, according to the conventions attached to the register (and genre) concerned : this might be done by asking him to guess the likely implications of focussing effects in a thriller or to foresee the probable sequencing of functions[13] in such highly structured registers as lectures, job interviews, etc... Again, one could ask him to gather from a pre-sequence of the type " Are you busy at the moment ? " or " Are you doing anything special tonight ? " what the following function of that speaker is likely to be, in order to respond accordingly to the pre-sequence, etc...

However limited, such fairly diversified listening comprehension training, deliberately oriented towards subsequent production, besides helping comprehension proper, may sensitize the learner to what is to be taken into account in oral expression in order to be " in tune " with other participants[14], reduce reaction time and facilitate the passage from an auditor state to a speaker state. In the subsequent phases of the encoding process (planning, formulation, monitoring), reaction time can, I think, mainly be reduced by giving the learner immediately utilizable tools, that is, by bridging the gap between usage and use, between reference rules and expression rules, as Henry Widdowson suggests. And the discovery of linguistic, prosodic and kinetic patterning arrived at through the listening comprehension training will further be of help.

The other thing to do is acknowledge shortcomings and find ways of neutralizing the negative effect they might have on communication. Here are a few :

(1) Encoding difficulties often entail delay in responses which can be interpreted as coldness or lack of interest. The use of integration signals, showing that one is acknowledging the point, or the use of " well ", showing that one acknowledges the question and tries to answer it, are sufficient to clear the misunderstanding. Another problem due to delay is that, by the time one has found how to formulate an idea, the topic may have been dropped : all one needs then is deictic devices to refer back to that particular point in the interaction, or a phrase like " by the way " to show that one's contribution is unrelated to what is being discussed.

[13] See CANDLIN (1974).
[14] See CRYSTAL and DAVY.

(2) In L2, formulation is often inappropriate, approximative or incomplete. To remedy this while gaining encoding time, one needs " conversational tools "[15] which either point to the approximative character of the formulation (e.g. " sort of ", " so to speak ", " if you like ", " let's say " ... with appropriate voice quality and facial expressions), appeal to the listener's indulgence or imagination (e.g. " you know " at the end of a fragment, or generalizing phrases), or signal an attempt at clarification (e.g. " I mean ").

(3) Moreover, formulation in L2 is often too categorical, sometimes even aggressive. So first of all, one needs linguistic or other means of nuancing or taking back what has been said too hastily. But essentially, one must be sensitized to aggressive or categorical intonation patterns related to given functions. Besides, in the teaching of functions such as request or contradiction, which can appear either constraining or disparaging to the listener, toned-down formulae should be highlighted, rather than performatives or other straight-foward structures (such as the imperative and " I don't agree ").

Needless to say, most of these pedagogical suggestions are tentative and highly provisional. A number of them will prove not to work out in practice, all will need to be adapted to the level, needs and motivations of the audience, and many more will have to be added as advances in psycholinguistics and discourse analysis are made, for they are as yet much too sporadic to get anywhere near to securing transfer.

But at least, this is a step in the direction pointed to by Tatiana Slama-Cazacu in her article " Is a socio-psycholinguistics necessary ? "[16], a direction which, I feel, cannot lead one far astray since it is an evidence that the speaker cannot be isolated from his environment any more than the message can be isolated from the speaker.

[15] See SAUNDERS.

[16] " Taking into consideration the social context of language and communication is a NECESSARY and even ESSENTIAL condition for the existence of psycholinguistics — and this is the direction it should take in the future. "

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